

NOAH BECKER'S

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

OF CONTEMPORARY ART

(<https://whitehotmagazine.com/>)

*"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
NOVEMBER 2023*

Don Joint: Gods and Demi-Gods at George Billis Gallery



Love Disarmed, (detail), cyanotype collage.

By ERIK LA PRADE November 21, 2023

MEMO
In Greek and Roman mythology, when the gods were attracted to mortals and wanted to have sexual relations with them, they generally assumed another form, such as a bull, an eagle, a swan, or even rain. Revealing themselves in their full power would imperil the mortals they were in love with, and ultimately destroy the objects of their desire. Yet, this mythological interaction between gods and mortals could cut both ways: while these chosen men and women might be granted unique powers, they could also be transformed into an animal, struck blind, or be otherwise deformed if they angered their immortal lover.

Non-Western and pre-Judeo-Christian/Muslim Western cultures routinely focused attention on sexuality and reproductive processes as part of religious and normal secular life. Both male and female sexual symbols were frequently found in public art, where they represented several important concepts:

“Although female nudity was not uncommon, phallic symbolism was at the center of much classical art. The phallus would often be depicted on Hermes, Pan Priapus or similar deities across various art forms. Rather than being seen as erotic, its symbolism was often associated with protection, fertility and even healing.”

However, in the West, with the rise and influence of Christianity, sexually explicit subject matter of any sort, hetero- or homosexual, was banned in both literature and art. As cultural mores loosened after the Renaissance, eroticism began to creep back into Western art, but not until the twentieth century was sexually explicit content deemed acceptable in “high” art. Today, the idea of idealized beauty continues to be a major theme and preoccupation throughout our culture. Strong works of erotic art are capable of mirroring our own personal ideals or fantasies of beauty, drawing the viewer into an esoteric place by portraying intimacy and physical desire in a way which rises above mere erotic stimulation.

In his current show, GODS AND DEMI-GODS, Don Joint has created a personal pantheon of former lovers and/or friends, casting them as “deities” based upon ancient models. In these pictures of his friends and former lovers, Joint has transported them into a classical context, presenting them as mortals, but ones who

possess a special, even extraordinary, “godlike” sexual quality and prowess. Joint’s treatment of the male nude transports these images back into historical and mythological time. In fact, it was the myth of Narcissus that originally inspired Joint to give his subjects an ancient look and feel. It is the original “perfect self-love story.” There are three different works in the show using that name and appropriately, self-love, as revealed in these pictures, is one of the themes of the show.

Joint is an artist who enjoys the processes of art and this show evolved out of his fascination with the technique of making photographs using the cyanotype method. Cyanotype is one of the earliest photographic processes. While the first black and white photograph from a negative was produced by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1835, “the cyanotype print was discovered and made in 1842, by astronomer, scientist, and botanist John Herschel. . . The distinctive feature of the cyanotype print is its shade of cyan blue, resulting from exposure to ultraviolet light.” Cyanotypes are created by coating paper with a chemical solution and placing either a photographic negative or an object directly onto the paper. The image is developed by exposure to ultraviolet light (usually sunlight) which turns the paper surrounding the image a bluish, or cyan, hue.

William Henry Fox Talbot is one of Joint’s favorite photographers: “His photos look like you are touching a different age, but you can’t tell what age it is, whether it’s ancient Rome, the Renaissance or the Victorian period, they have a timeless look to them.” Soon after the discovery of photography by William Henry Fox Talbot, male and female nude photographs were being made by pioneering photographers such as Hippolyte Bayard, Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, Eugene Durieu and Nadar. But for Joint, “straight, black-and-white photographs of male nudes with erections immediately bring pornographic images to people’s mind, rather than the consideration it is the instrument that caused people to be born. A cyanotype image softens that reference and gives you a Fox Talbot feel.” Indeed, the use of a deep cyan blue in the images in the show conveys a feeling of intimacy and humanity, which would not be as strong were the images in stark black and white.

Throughout his career, the artist has worked in a range of different styles and materials; from collages to decorative glass mosaics to photography; using found letters, found pictures, self-portraits and nude models. In this current show, Joint exhibits his use of cyanotypes for the first time.

Joint doesn't think of himself as a "process artist," as his only concern, whether he works in a darkroom or not, is "getting to the final image." Yet his work with the technically intricate and unusual technique of cyanotype in this show belies his claim. A number of the works demonstrate his use of other materials such as paint, collage and mixed media materials as well. Several of the cyanotypes are mounted on handmade paper; the edges and backgrounds are splattered with the same chemical used in the photographic cyan image. By manipulating these surrounding areas, the pictures have an out-of-bounds effect: sexual energy abstracted, which heightens the physical beauty of the nude male inside the picture frame.



The Caryatids' Dream of Flesh, cyanotype collage, 32" x 37".

There are thirty-nine works in the show, but not all of them are cyanotypes. The gallery's front window displays four works, two cyanotype collages and two photo collages. I liked the cyanotype on the left side of the window, titled *The Caryatid's Dream of Flesh*. It is a large cyanotype collage showing two nude male figures standing opposite each other, arms overhead, metaphorically supporting fantasy lovers. It has a classical look and offers a preview of the works inside the gallery.

Inside, situated in the left corner of the gallery, is a grouping of five antique glass bottles titled *OBJECTS: Boys in Bottles*. The bottles come in various shapes and sizes like the photographs of the male nudes they contain. Some bottles may have their original labels or stamps still attached to them. They are displayed on plexi-glass shelves mounted on the walls.



Boys in Bottles, mixed media objects.

Across the room, on the far right side of the gallery, is a stand-alone podium where the artist has arranged another group of five objects; a wooden box containing two bottles with photos in them; a photo of Mercury attached to the top of a hand-carved piece of wood; a wooden, decorated box titled *Golden Rule Box*, containing a smaller glass box with a photo of a smiling young man lying on his back, with an erect penis, and several other objects.

MENU



Framed photos and boxes, mixed media objects.

Besides being an artist, Joint is a connoisseur of decorative objects and antiquities. His knowledge in this area is apparent in the way he has staged this exhibition; there is nothing precious in the manner in which Joint arranges these bottles and boxes to display his nude images.

The main gallery room displays twenty-one cyanotype images. The largest work is a triptych consisting of three 50" x 50" cyanotype-and-paint photographs of a young man titled *Boy God*. The figure in each photograph has six arms and resembles the Hindu god Vishnu, the god of Preservation. The image is not a true depiction of Vishnu, as the boy also wears a cross hanging from a chain on his neck; Joint has combined two figures to create a composite god of the West and the East. This triptych is impressive but does not dominate the show since it is hung on a rear gallery wall that is set back, occupying its own separate space.

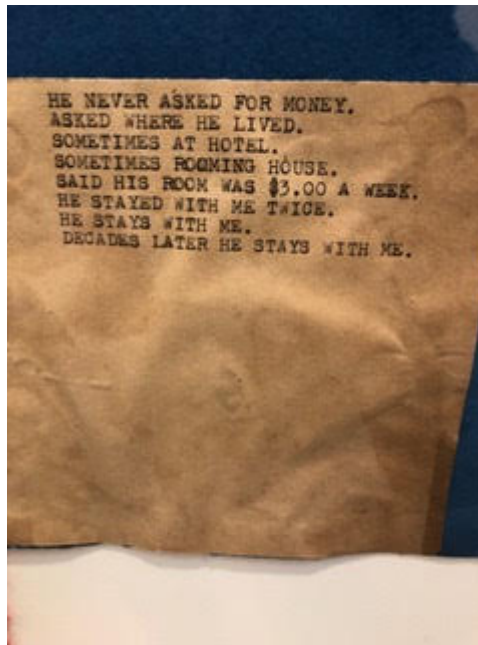
MENU



Boy God, (one panel of triptych), cyanotype and paint, 50" x 50".

In eleven of these pictures the word “God” appears in the title, including *Pittsburgh God*; *Pool God*; *Boy God*, etc. The title *Punk God*, is used twice in two separate works. (One particular title, *Blue Movie God*, whether deliberately or by accident, references an old slang phrase for pornographic movies.) When I asked Joint what happened to some of the people in these pictures, he told me he didn’t know: “Some may have gotten out of the life, some may have died. . . .” Yet, the memory of his encounters with these people has stayed with him for decades. The pictures that most poignantly convey the artist’s memory are the ones that have brief lines or poems typed by him and attached to the front of the picture, providing his own meditation on the subject of the picture. These add a human and effective touch to these intimate portrayals, bringing a deeper meaning to the subject matter.

MENU



Pittsburgh God, (detail), cyanotype collage, 24" x 36".

Joint creates a parallel between old Western and Eastern myths and the people in these pictures. Both once occupied cosmologies that were destroyed by an overriding force; the ancient gods banished by Christian mores and taboos, and these hustlers and sexual charmers wiped out and obliterated by the AIDS epidemic. To that extent, this show is a memorial to these people but there is nothing morbid about it. The show is powerful on several levels but the main one is that the artist has elevated these anonymous people, through his art, into a meaningful constellation worth seeing.

The show is open at the George Billis Gallery, 527 West 23rd St, on the ground floor, from Thursday-Saturday, 12-6 pm, through December 29, 2023. WM



ERIK LA PRADE

Erik La Prade has a B.A. and M. A. From City College. Some of his interviews and articles have appeared in Art in America, The Brooklyn Rail, ArtCritical and NewsWhistle. His book, *Breaking Through: Richard Bellamy and the Green Gallery, 1960-1965*, was published in 2010. MidMarch Arts Press. His forthcoming book, *WEATHER*, is published by LAST WORD BOOKS. Olympia, Washington. 2020

[view all articles from this author \(/contributors/erik-la-prade/1080\)](/contributors/erik-la-prade/1080)